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Anti-smoking group knows how to clear the air

BYLINE: By TAMARA HENRY

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Robert Rosner really knows how to clear the air, literally and figuratively, and this ability has won him respect from smokers and non-smokers.

Rosner, executive director of the Smoking Policy Institute, was recently awarded the Surgeon General's Medallion in a surprise ceremony at the private office of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop.

''You have a knack for going in and achieving a smoke-free workplace and making people like it,'' Koop said.

This month marks the 25th anniversary of the first surgeon general's report that connected smoking with increased risk of lung cancer.

Cigarette smoking has been a prime target of Koop, who has called for a ''smoke-free society by the year 2000'' and announced in May that nicotine in tobacco is as addictive as heroin and cocaine.

Statistics show Americans consumed an estimated 573 billion cigarettes last year, and that 300,000 to 500,000 of them die every year because they smoke.

Rosner, whose group is based in Seattle, was clearly surprised by the award; he had dropped by Koop's office for a brief greeting.

The surgeon general said ''the institute is a credible, visible and centralized information resource, committed to protecting people from involuntary exposure to tobacco smoke in the workplace and to helping business develop healthy options to smoking in the workplace.''

The National Cancer Institute described the program as ''widely acknowledged as the nation's technical expert on the issue of environmental tobacco smoke and its impact in the workplace.''

The institute has helped determine who may smoke at work and where at organizations as diverse as Pacific Northwest Bell, CIGNA Health-plan of Arizona, Ralston Purina headquarters in St. Louis and the Indian Health

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Service, which is a division of the Health and Human Services Department.

Pointing to a key success at the Lexington Clinic, a Kentucky medical center, Rosner quipped, ''We got smoking banned in the middle of the tobacco belt.''

''The key thing is not whether you choose to smoke but when and where you choose to smoke,'' Rosner said in an interview. ''I really have a great deal of empathy for how smokers get treated in this society, and I know what it's like not to breathe.''

The institute's approach is unique. The focus is not on getting people to quit smoking but to help people determine if they are ready to quit smoking and the best way to stop. Rosner stressed that most smokers ''already are carrying guilt'' and do not need a ''value-laden format'' but an approach ''with a level of reasonableness and respect.''

Companies and organizations are given a comprehensive list of all the policy alternatives and options so that companies can develop policies based ont heir special needs. Rosner said that a total ban is the most effective response to some company's circumstances, while designated areas are more appropriate solutions for others.

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